



I-81: Needed Improvements

SR 19 (2006)

Report to the Governor and General Assembly of Virginia

Virginia Department of Transportation
1401 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

January 2007

**Report on SR 19 Interstate Route 81:
Department of Transportation To Address Urgently Needed Improvements Thereof**

December 2006

Preface

The Senate of Virginia during its 2006 session directed the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to expeditiously address improvements to the Interstate 81 (I-81) corridor by taking three actions: plan and construct additional capacity as needed for increasing traffic and safety concerns; direct available federal funding to safety and capacity improvements; and plan and develop with the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) and private rail companies rail projects that will reduce the number of trucks traveling the I-81 corridor.

VDOT staffs from Central Office, the I-81 Office of Program Management and Bristol, Salem and Staunton districts have worked diligently for the last three years on federally required studies that must be completed before capacity can be added to I-81 or safety improvements can be made. The agency also has worked cross-functionally to identify and prioritize safety improvements that qualify for federal funding. In addition, staffs with both DRPT and VDOT have coordinated with Norfolk Southern Corp. on the development of the Heartland Corridor, an east-west rail project designed to relieve stress on I-81, as well as a new intermodal rail facility proposed to be built by Norfolk Southern Corp. in the Roanoke region near I-81.

In October 2006, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) endorsed a multi-faceted approach to improving I-81, enlisting both VDOT and DRPT to carry out its strategy.

Many years will be required to complete the actions described in SR 19, and work is under way in each of the three areas. This report, prepared by VDOT's I-81 Office of Program Management, details progress to date along with anticipated future milestones. Principle author of the report is Laura L. Southard.

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Executive Summary

Following action by the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) on October 11, 2006, both the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) are positioned to carry out the three directives of SR 19 (*see Appendix A: SR 19*) as passed by the Senate of Virginia in 2006. The CTB sets policy and direction and allots funding for certain agencies within the transportation secretariat.

CTB members voted unanimously to accept a comprehensive improvement strategy for the Interstate 81 corridor in Virginia that includes:

- planning future capacity improvements;
- making short-term safety improvements to the interstate; and
- conducting a multi-state freight rail study in cooperation with Norfolk Southern Corp.

(*See Appendix B: News Release – CTB Endorses I-81 Improvement Strategy.*) These three strategies generally correspond to the three actions directed by the Senate.

First, in looking at possible future expansion of I-81, the CTB considered substantial public involvement and findings of the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study that is being conducted by VDOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). This study – required by federal law before improvements can be made to I-81 – shows that 37 percent of I-81 needs one additional lane in each direction, while most of the remainder may need up to two additional lanes in each direction to handle future traffic. The CTB directed VDOT to finalize the study (also called the Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)) with a future concept for I-81 that would build not more than one or two general purpose lanes only where needed in each direction. The next step in the process is for VDOT to send the study to FHWA for approval. That approval could come in the first quarter of 2007.

Although future needs have been identified for I-81 and the federally-required Tier 1 study is nearly complete, additional studies are required before construction can begin on improvements to I-81. These studies will be more specific in nature and will focus on eight shorter sections of the interstate identified in the EIS. It is estimated that each of these Tier 2 studies will take from six months to two years to complete, depending on the scope of the project and its potential impacts. Because these eight identified sections of I-81 are independent of each other, it is possible that several studies could be under way simultaneously.

Funding has been allocated by the CTB for VDOT to conduct Tier 2 studies. However, no funding has been identified for construction to increase capacity on I-81. Therefore, no timetable for construction is available.

Second, the Board recognized that there is an immediate need for safety and operational improvements along I-81. VDOT was directed to pursue a program of short-term safety improvements to include building dedicated truck climbing lanes and extending on- and off-ramps at interchanges, among others.

Many of these short-term safety improvements can be designed quickly with some construction under way within two years. However, truck climbing lanes and ramp extensions alone will cost more than \$400 million, and only about \$100 million in federal funding is available. VDOT is committed to capturing and maximizing available federal funds to get some of these safety improvements under construction as soon as possible.

Third, the CTB directed that a multi-state Freight Rail Study of the I-81 corridor, conducted by DRPT in cooperation with the Office of the Secretary of Transportation, the Multimodal Planning Office and Norfolk Southern Corp., begin as soon as possible. The study will identify high impact, short-term rail improvements in the I-81 corridor and identify several scenarios under which truck traffic could divert to rail. Freight that flows into and through Virginia but originates in other states will be included in the study. The rail study will take about a year to complete, and based on its results, Virginia will be prepared later in 2007 to facilitate specific rail improvement projects to improve freight movement in the general corridor.

In summary, recent action by the CTB on I-81 reflects the direction of SR 19 and provides a framework for both VDOT and DRPT to continue the work the agencies have begun to address current and future needs of the corridor.

Chapter 1.

Plan and Construct Additional Capacity

SR 19 requests the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to address urgently needed improvements to the Interstate 81 (I-81) corridor in Virginia. In doing so, VDOT is directed to take three actions. The first is: “subject to federal law and regulation, plan for and construct additional capacity as needed to accommodate increasing traffic and address safety concerns.”

VDOT is in fact planning for additional capacity to meet future traffic needs on I-81 and is complying with all federal law and regulation.

Implementing changes to interstate highways requires approval by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and is subject to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It is essential that VDOT and FHWA work together on all approval processes and in complying with NEPA to ensure that federal funding can be used to make improvements to the highway. This close working relationship between the two agencies to plan the future of I-81 in Virginia began in late 2003 and continues today.

NEPA requires agencies to conduct studies so that facts and data can be gathered for the purpose of making informed decisions. In November 2003, VDOT’s Commissioner and FHWA’s Division Administrator signed a Process Streamlining Agreement in which the agencies agreed to conduct a study of the I-81 corridor using a two-tiered approach (*see Appendix C: November 6, 2003 Process Streamlining Agreement Between the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration on the Interstate 81 Corridor National Environmental Policy Act Process*). This tiered approach was chosen because broad questions about the corridor needed to be answered before the agencies could move into more site-specific environmental studies.

In early 2004, VDOT and FHWA began the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study, Tier 1 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The study was designed to help the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) and FHWA answer broad questions about the I-81 corridor. According to the Process Streamlining Agreement, at the end of the Tier 1 study, decisions on the following issues would be made:

- Improvement concepts for highway and rail facilities, such as number of additional highway lanes, partial or complete segregation of trucks and passenger vehicles on I-81, and additional rail capacity;
- Approval to advance I-81 as a toll pilot in accordance with the conditional provisional acceptance of I-81 as a toll pilot under Section 1216(b) of TEA-21;
- Roadway and rail components to be evaluated in Tier 2 NEPA document(s) and the type of NEPA document(s);
- The location of the corridor for studying future highway and rail alignments in Tier 2 NEPA document(s); and
- Possible purchase of certain right-of-way parcels on a case-by-case basis.

In late 2005, FHWA approved the Tier 1 Draft EIS, which included data to help the CTB and FHWA address the decision points defined in the Process Streamlining Agreement. Public input from citizens, elected officials and local government representatives was encouraged and incorporated into the study.

Some of the key findings of the study are:

- 2004 traffic volumes will nearly double by 2035.
- Nearly all of the corridor needs additional capacity by 2035.
- Rail improvements do not eliminate the need for road improvements because they make only a slight change to the number of lanes needed on I-81 in Virginia.
- Estimates of future traffic volume do not support building two additional lanes in each direction for use only by trucks. Such a design would provide too much room for trucks and not enough for cars.
- Although short-term improvements and rail improvements do not work on their own to meet future traffic needs of the I-81 corridor, both could complement roadway improvements.
- Based on traffic demand, a concept with a varying number of lanes most efficiently addresses the future capacity needs of I-81.
- Up to 37% of I-81 needs one additional lane in each direction, while much of the remainder may need up to two additional lanes in each direction to handle future traffic.

The CTB in the fall of 2006 considered these findings of the Tier 1 DEIS as well as substantial public input. Board members took action October 11, 2006, by directing VDOT to finalize the Tier 1 EIS to improve the existing roadway with a widening concept that would build not more than one or two general purpose lanes in each direction only where needed. (The Board also endorsed a program of short-term improvements that address safety concerns but do not increase capacity, and these are discussed in the Chapter 2.)

The Tier 1 Final EIS is under development, and the last step in this study process is for FHWA to issue a Record of Decision. This decision could come as early as the first quarter of 2007 and indicates approval by FHWA of the Tier 1 document.

Tier 2 analyses are more detailed environmental studies, which will be performed on individual sections of I-81. These studies provide site-specific details that are needed in order to satisfy the requirements of NEPA before construction can begin for either additional capacity or safety improvements. Each study will take from six months to two years or more to complete, depending upon the scope of the project and its potential impacts.

Provided that Tier 2 studies are completed successfully and that funding is available, individual construction projects can be scheduled into VDOT's Six Year Improvement Program. Funding currently is not identified for adding capacity to I-81; therefore, no timetable for construction has been set.

Some federal money is available to build truck climbing lanes and to make other safety improvements to I-81. These improvements and funding sources are discussed in Chapter 2, Direct Federal Aid to Safety and Capacity Improvements.

Chapter 2.

Direct Federal Aid to Safety and Capacity Improvements

The second action requested in SR 19 is: “direct federal highway construction aid that may be available or may become available for Interstate Route 81 in Virginia under the recently passed SAFETEA-LU and other federal legislation to critical safety and capacity improvements, including, where appropriate, additional lanes to assist trucks in climbing steep grades, with priority given to projects that can be accomplished in the existing right of way.”

VDOT has worked consistently in recent years to make safety and limited capacity improvements to I-81. For example, more than \$172 million has been invested in widening seven miles at Bristol, building a new Exit 118 with collector/distributor roads at Christiansburg, and extending on- and off-ramps and installing median guardrail throughout the Roanoke and New River valleys. Currently, four replacement bridges are nearing completion near Lexington, costing some \$60 million, and a bridge is under construction at Exit 313 near Winchester for \$9 million.

Identifying, prioritizing and funding safety improvements is an ongoing effort. In the fall of 2006, VDOT staff proposed to the CTB a series of further safety and operational enhancements. The proposals were developed by a cross-functional group of VDOT engineers representing the I-81 Office of Program Management, the three highway construction districts along the corridor and the Central Office. Among the recommendations were: building dedicated truck climbing lanes in selected locations; extending more on- and off-ramps; installing guardrail along narrow medians to help prevent crossover crashes; and correcting curve problems, among others.

Recognizing the immediate need to address safety on I-81, the CTB on October 11, 2006, directed VDOT to undertake a program of safety and operational enhancements (*see Appendix B: News Release – CTB Endorses I-81 Improvement Strategy*). These improvements include “lanes to assist trucks in climbing steep grades,” as described in SR 19.

A dozen possible climbing lane locations along I-81 have been identified by VDOT engineers (see Map: Proposed I-81 Truck Climbing Lane Locations). Building all of these proposed truck climbing lane projects is estimated to cost some \$366 million.

VDOT has worked with FHWA to identify approximately \$100 million in federal funding through SAFETEA-LU that is available and may be used for truck climbing lanes. VDOT is committed to capturing and maximizing these federal funds, although they may build climbing lanes in as few as one or two of the proposed locations. Additional resources will be needed in order to construct truck climbing lanes in all of the proposed locations.

The safety and operational improvements endorsed by the CTB for I-81 also include extending on- and off-ramps in many locations, increasing the use of Safety Service Patrols for incident clearance, and coordinating with the Virginia State Police and localities for increased speed enforcement, among others.

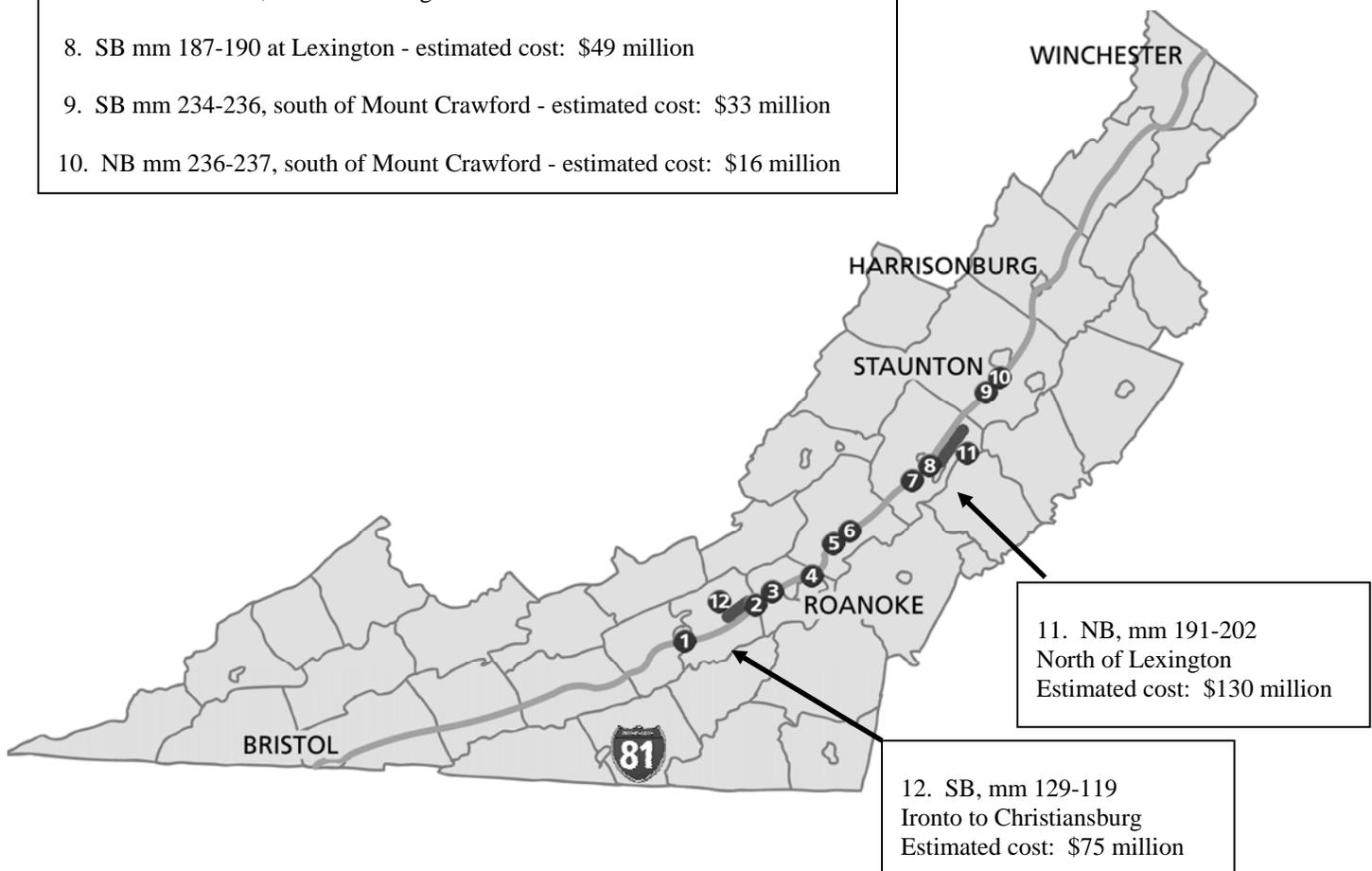
Many of these improvements can get under way with a minimum of planning and design. Construction on some could begin within two years. This program of short-term safety improvements is critical for addressing current travel conditions on the interstate, but it does not provide additional lanes or capacity, as the legislation requests. In fact, there is no funding available to provide additional capacity, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Cost of the entire safety program – including truck climbing lanes and other enhancements – as presented by VDOT to the CTB is more than \$800 million.

Proposed I-81 Truck Climbing Lane Locations

**Possible climbing lane locations
(mile marker locations are approximate)**

1. NB mm 105-109 at New River near Radford - estimated cost: \$6.6 million
2. NB mm 129-131, Ironto to Dixie Caverns - estimated cost: \$3.9 million
3. NB mm 132-133, north of Dixie Caverns - estimated cost: \$1.3 million
4. NB mm 146-148, Hollins to weigh station - estimated cost: \$6.8 million
5. NB/SB mm 163-165, south of Buchanan - estimated cost: \$8 million
6. NB mm 165-167 at James River near Buchanan - estimated cost: \$8 million
7. SB mm 182-184, south of Lexington - estimated cost: \$28 million
8. SB mm 187-190 at Lexington - estimated cost: \$49 million
9. SB mm 234-236, south of Mount Crawford - estimated cost: \$33 million
10. NB mm 236-237, south of Mount Crawford - estimated cost: \$16 million



Total needs = \$366 million

Chapter 3.

Plan and Develop Rail Projects to Reduce Trucks Traveling I-81

The third action requested in SR 19 is: “plan and develop, with the cooperation of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation and private rail companies, an east-west rail project and a north-south rail project that will have the effect of reducing the number of trucks traveling the I-81 corridor.”

This charge is more appropriately within the purview of the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT). The staffs at DRPT and VDOT frequently share information as they continue to work on multi-modal efforts to meet future needs of the I-81 corridor in Virginia.

The following paragraphs provide details of current DRPT activities regarding rail projects and studies that could possibly reduce the number of trucks traveling I-81. These activities also correlate with work that is under way by DRPT to comply with Chapter 934 of the 2006 Acts of Assembly.

There are two specific activities under way by DRPT that will comply with the direction of SR 19. The first is a critical Freight Rail Study to help determine the feasibility of removing or diverting trucks from I-81, and the second is the development of an east-west rail project.

In October of 2006, the CTB directed that a Freight Rail Study of the I-81 corridor be conducted by DRPT in cooperation with Norfolk Southern Corp. (*see Appendix B: News Release – CTB Endorses I-81 Improvement Strategy*). The purpose of the study is to identify high impact, short-term rail improvements in the I-81 corridor and identify several scenarios under which truck traffic could divert to rail.

DRPT is including freight flows from other states along I-81 in the Freight Rail Study, which will take about a year to complete. Partners in the study are the Secretary of Transportation’s Office, the Commonwealth’s Multimodal Office, Norfolk Southern Corp., Cambridge Systematics and Woodside Consulting. Timeframe for the study is fall 2006 through summer 2007.

The Freight Rail Study extends at least 500 miles to include both Tennessee and Pennsylvania. It will explore the Shenandoah and Route 29 (Piedmont) rail corridors and also consider the option of new rail right-of-way from Front Royal to Culpeper. In addition, this study will consider roll on/roll off and other rail technologies that might prove useful for decreasing the volume of heavy truck traffic on I-81.

A financial evaluation will be an important part of the Freight Rail Study. This information will include the capital cost of upgrades and construction as well as the operating cost for the level of rail service needed to achieve truck competitive speed and reliability. Other factors in a financial evaluation are future fuel price scenarios that help determine diversion rates and the capability to meet debt service and operate profitably.

It is important to understand that rail lines to be studied are owned by Norfolk Southern Corp. There currently are no federal highway funding categories that VDOT can use to implement improvements to privately owned rail lines. Therefore, DRPT's study will explore financing alternatives including bond financing and public-private partnerships. Also, recent federal transportation legislation, SAFETEA-LU, includes a number of general freight finance provisions that may be available for obtaining funds to improve privately owned rail lines.

Based on the results of DRPT's Freight Rail Study, Virginia will be prepared to identify specific rail projects to improve freight movement late in 2007. DRPT will keep the Rail Advisory Board and the CTB updated as the study proceeds.

Developing an east-west rail project in Virginia is another activity under way by the Virginia Port Authority (VPA), DRPT and the Office of the Secretary of Transportation in conjunction with Norfolk Southern Corp. This project fits with a multi-state public-private partnership now in development called the Heartland Corridor. A joint venture between Norfolk Southern Corp. and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Heartland Corridor intends to provide efficient rail travel between Norfolk and Chicago. In September 2006, the states of Ohio, West Virginia and Virginia along with Norfolk Southern Corp. entered into an agreement with FHWA that will govern the release of \$95 million in federal funding from SAFETEA-LU for the Heartland Corridor. Total participation by the Commonwealth is \$22.3 million. This funding will allow tunnel clearances to be raised and other overhead obstructions modified so that double-stacked international and domestic cargo containers can move by rail from the ports of Hampton Roads to the Midwestern United States. The Heartland Corridor's expanded rail capacity and improved transit time for commodities may well prove to be an alternative to trucking, relieving stress on I-81.

Key to the Heartland Corridor's success will be the construction of shipping terminals at certain locations. DRPT currently is working with Norfolk Southern Corp. to review and evaluate potential intermodal terminal sites in the Roanoke region of Virginia. The facility must be located on the Heartland Corridor and the I-81 Corridor shared line section in Virginia to ensure a competitive time advantage for freight rail shipments and to maximize the usefulness of the facility to serve the I-81 corridor.

As part of intermodal site evaluation, VDOT will provide DRPT with analyses of potential impacts to existing roads, including I-81. All site proposals for the Roanoke Regional Intermodal Facility have been made available for public review and comment. In addition, public comment on potential site locations was solicited, and a 45-day comment period began November 30, 2006, and runs through January 16, 2007. The public comment period included a public meeting, held December 13, 2006 at VDOT's Salem District auditorium.

DRPT expects to make an announcement regarding the Heartland Corridor intermodal facility in February 2007, following the conclusion of the 45-day review and public comment period. DRPT is committed to establishing an intermodal facility as part of the Heartland Corridor project, funded through the Rail Enhancement Fund.

List of Appendices

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Appendix C: Summary of November 6, 2003 Process Streamlining Agreement Between the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration on the Interstate 81 Corridor National Environmental Policy Act Process

(Full text is available at www.I-81.org or by calling Fred Altizer, P.E., VDOT's I-81 Program Manager, at 540-767-6081.)

APPENDIX A: SR 19

SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 19

Requesting the Virginia Department of Transportation to address urgently needed improvements to the Interstate Route 81 corridor in Virginia. Report.

Agreed to by the Senate, March 7, 2006

WHEREAS, there is significant concern in Western Virginia over safety and capacity issues related to Interstate Route 81; and

WHEREAS, there is immediate concern about the negative impact on commerce and tourism because of the unsafe conditions and unpredictable delays; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate of Virginia, That the Virginia Department of Transportation be requested to address urgently needed improvements to the Interstate Route 81 corridor in Virginia. In so doing, the Department of Transportation shall expeditiously take the following actions: (i) subject to federal law and regulation, plan for and construct additional capacity as needed to accommodate increasing traffic and address safety concerns; (ii) direct federal highway construction aid that may be available or may become available for Interstate Route 81 in Virginia under the recently passed SAFETEA-LU and other federal legislation to critical safety and capacity improvements, including, where appropriate, additional lanes to assist trucks in climbing steep grades, with priority given to projects that can be accomplished in the existing right-of-way; and (iii) plan and develop, with the cooperation of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation and private rail companies, an east-west rail project and a north-south rail project that will have the effect of reducing the number of trucks traveling the Interstate Route 81 corridor. The Department of Transportation shall submit to the Division of Legislative Automated Systems an executive summary and report of its progress in meeting the requests of this resolution no later than the first day of the 2007 Regular Session of the General Assembly. The executive summary and report shall be submitted for publication as a report document as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the General Assembly's website; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the Secretary of Transportation, the Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner, and the Director of the Department of Rail and Public Transportation in order that they may be apprised of the sense of the Senate of Virginia in this matter.

APPENDIX B: News Release



NEWS RELEASE

RELEASE: IMMEDIATE

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Oct. 11, 2006

CO-0654

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CTB ENDORSES I-81 IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

Board encourages rail study, short-term safety improvements, long-term widening

ROANOKE – An Interstate 81 Freight Rail Study, a variety of short-term safety improvements along existing I-81, and the completion of the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study all got the green light from the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) during its monthly business meeting, held Wednesday, Oct. 11, at Hotel Roanoke.

“Today’s action by the Commonwealth Transportation Board shows our commitment to a comprehensive, multimodal strategy for transportation,” said Pierce Homer, Virginia’s secretary of transportation and chairman of the CTB. “Road and rail improvements are essential in the I-81 corridor, and we also recognize the critical links both provide to our ports.”

Short-term improvements

The board also said that there is an immediate need for safety and operational improvements along I-81, apart from possible long-term expansion. The Virginia Department of Transportation will pursue a program of short-term safety improvements to include building dedicated truck climbing lanes and extending on- and off-ramps at interchanges, among others. Improvements will be prioritized based on demonstrated safety needs. Many of these improvements could be designed quickly with some construction under way within two years.

“Truck climbing lanes and ramp extensions alone will cost more than \$400 million, and we don’t have that kind of money today,” said Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner David Ekern, P.E. “But we will maximize available funds and put as many of these improvements on pavement as possible.”

Freight Rail

In a resolution, board members directed the Department of Rail and Public Transportation to conduct an I-81 Freight Rail Study as soon as possible in cooperation with the Office of the Secretary of Transportation and Norfolk Southern Railway. This study will identify high impact,

(more)

short-term rail improvements in the corridor and identify various scenarios of truck traffic diversion to rail. In cooperation with other states, the study will examine at least 500 miles of the I-81 corridor in

order to improve freight movement throughout the corridor. Based on study results, Virginia will be prepared to identify specific rail improvement projects as early as next year.

“We fully believe that we must enhance rail service in the I-81 corridor,” said Matthew Tucker, director of Virginia’s Department of Rail and Public Transportation. “We welcome the opportunity to engage in this study with our private partner, and we intend to move quickly toward rail improvements to relieve some of the stress on I-81.”

Future needs

In addressing future needs, the CTB considered substantial public involvement and findings of the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study (Tier 1 Draft Environmental Impact Statement). The study shows that 37 percent of I-81 needs one additional lane in each direction, while the remainder may need up to two additional lanes in each direction to handle future traffic. The board directed VDOT to finalize the study with a widening concept that would build not more than one or two general purpose lanes only where needed in each direction. The board also resolved that future improvements will reflect a context sensitive design, so that the improvements take into account the surrounding environment and future land-use planning.

Estimates of future traffic volume do not support building two additional lanes in each direction for use only by trucks. Such a design would provide too much capacity for trucks and not enough for cars, according to the study.

In addition, the study shows that if I-81 were tolled, the amount of traffic that would divert to other roads is fairly low. Therefore, tolling will be considered alongside other sources of long-term funding, and VDOT will continue its I-81 tolling application under federal law.

“It’s very clear that more lanes will be needed on I-81,” said Ekern. “Virginia is an attractive state, and many people want to be here. We must be wise in planning to accommodate them, and it’s absolutely appropriate to complete this long-term planning study so that we will be ready to move forward with selective widening on an as-needed basis and as funds become available.”

The next step in the study process is for VDOT to finalize the Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement and send it to the Federal Highway Administration for approval. Upon FHWA approval – called a Record of Decision – VDOT can begin work on more site-specific Tier 2 analyses of the selected improvement concepts.

View the CTB’s I-81 resolution at www.ctb.virginia.gov.

-end-

Appendix C: Summary of November 6, 2003 Process Streamlining Agreement Between the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration on the Interstate 81 Corridor National Environmental Policy Act Process

(Full text is available at www.I-81.org or by calling Fred Altizer, P.E., VDOT's I-81 Program Manager, at 540-767-6081.)

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) signed an agreement Nov. 6, 2003, on how the federally required environmental review process will be carried out for the 325-mile I-81 corridor in Virginia. It was the first of its kind in Virginia.

The document clearly defines the decisions to be made and approvals to be granted at specific milestones of the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study (Tier 1 Draft Environmental Impact Statement). The agreement indicates that the study will be conducted in two phases, or tiers.

Tier 1 was designed to provide sufficient information on which informed decisions could be made on broad issues affecting the entire corridor. Tier 2 decisions are to be based on additional future site-specific analyses.

As stated in the Process Streamlining Agreement, these are the Tier 1 Decisions:

- Improvement concepts for highway and rail facilities, such as number of additional highway lanes, partial or complete segregation of trucks and passenger vehicles on I-81, and additional rail capacity;
- Approval to advance I-81 as a toll pilot in accordance with the conditional provisional acceptance of I-81 as a toll pilot under Section 1216(b) of TEA-21;
- Roadway and rail components to be evaluated in Tier 2 NEPA document(s) and the type of NEPA document(s);
- The location of the corridor for studying future highway and rail alignments in Tier 2 NEPA document(s);
- Possible purchase of certain right-of-way parcels on a case-by-case basis.

Decisions to be made at the conclusion of Tier 2 studies, as stated in the Process Streamlining Agreement, are:

- Approval of conceptual design features of the improvements (e.g., typical section) for components identified in Tier 1;
- Authority to use federal funds on final design of the improvements;
- Authority to acquire right-of-way;
- Eligibility for federal funding for construction;
- Approval to modify access to I-81.